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ABSTRACT

Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) for the 1999-2000 school year were examined to determine the similarities and differences between Michigan's charter and traditional school teachers. Data reveal that charter school teachers are much less likely to have appropriate certification than their counterparts in traditional public schools. The NCES data suggest that charter school teachers are less qualified in other important ways as well. Charter school teachers are more likely to have graduated from less competitive or noncompetitive undergraduate institutions than traditional school teachers. Data also show that more than 56% of traditional public school teachers have master's degrees, compared with 21.8% of charter school teachers. This is mainly a function of experience; a large majority of charter school teachers have less than 5 years experience and are less likely to have earned a master's degree. There are very few traditional school teachers in Michigan who are not certified in their main teaching assignment, but more than one-quarter of charter school teachers are not certified in their main assignments. More than one-third of secondary level teachers in charter schools are teaching "out of field." The average charter school teacher earns less than the average teacher in a traditional public school, even when salaries are adjusted to reflect differing experience levels. Charterschools are having more success than traditional schools in meeting the challenge of finding teachers who reflect the increasingly diverse demographics of their students. It is concluded that students in charter schools are generally taught by less qualified teachers than students in traditional public schools. (SLD)

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Who's Teaching in Michigan's Traditional and Charter Public Schools

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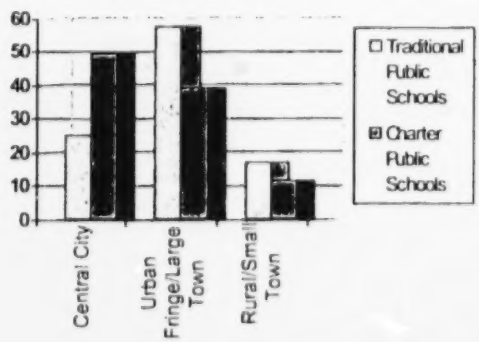
The advent of public school academies (charter schools) in Michigan has raised many questions around the state, including whether charter schools employ higher or lower quality teachers than traditional public schools. This question is particularly important because many charter schools have been established to serve urban, poor and minority children. These are the children who most desperately need high quality teachers but who have been least likely to get them in the traditional public school system.

Using data from the National Center for Educational Statistics for the 1999-2000 school year, we examined the similarities and differences between Michigan's charter and traditional school teachers. Regular full-time teachers, regular part-time teachers, itinerant teachers (who teach at two or more schools), and long-term substitutes are all included in the analysis. The data reveal that charter school teachers are much less likely to have appropriate certification than their counterparts in traditional public schools. The NCES data suggest that charter school teachers are less qualified in other important ways as well.

The Importance of Teacher Quality in Charter Schools

Students in charter schools are more likely to be poor, African-American and urban than students in the traditional public schools. About half of all charter schools in Michigan are located in urban centers. In a majority of charter schools more than 40 percent of students participate in the free and reduced lunch program, which is nearly twice the rate in traditional public schools. More than a third of charter schools have student populations that are more than 70 percent African-American. These charter schools are educating the children who are most likely to be "left behind" if they are not taught by highly qualified teachers.

School Location



Measuring Teacher Quality

Given the important role teachers play in the educational lives of their students, how do charter school teachers compare in quality to their counterparts in traditional public schools? A fundamental challenge to analyses of teacher quality is our inability to measure quality teaching. Currently, the best we can do is talk about teacher qualifications – a set of characteristics that we suppose are associated with quality. For instance, what kinds of colleges did teachers attend? Do teachers hold advanced degrees? Are they certified by the state to do what they do? How much experience do they have?

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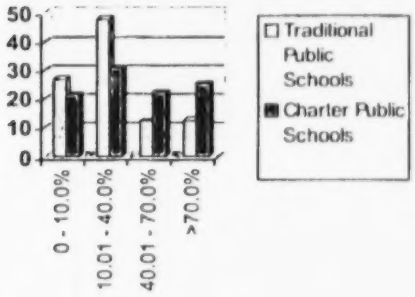
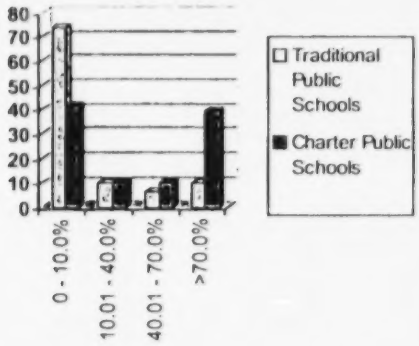
Percentage of African-American Students in a School



Percentage of School's Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch



Although they are far from perfect, these general indicators can help begin to answer the question of whether charter schools have the kinds of teachers their students need.

Academic Preparation:
Knowledge of content and of pedagogy are critical components of teacher quality. Teachers who graduated from more selective universities may be more likely to be high quality teachers (see Table1). Our analysis shows that charter school teachers are more likely to have graduated from less competitive or noncompetitive undergraduate institutions than traditional school teachers (28% compared to 18.2%).

The data also show that more than 56 percent of traditional public school teachers have master's degrees, compared to 21.8 percent of charter school teachers. This is mainly a function of experience. A large majority of charter school teachers have fewer than five years' experience (see below), and so are less likely to have earned a master's degree.

State Certification:
By law, all Michigan public schools, including charters, are required to staff their schools with certified teachers. There are very few traditional public school teachers in Michigan who are not certified in their main teaching assignment. By contrast, over one-quarter of charter school teachers are not certified in their main teaching assignment. Secondary level teachers in charter schools are particularly likely to be teaching outside of their certificated field(s). More than one-third of secondary level teachers in charter schools are teaching "out of field," meaning they are not certified in their main teaching assignment (see Table 2).

The certification comparison does not change much even if we consider the certification status held by a teacher in *any* subject, rather than certification in main assignment. Only 76.8 percent of charter school teachers are certified in at least one subject, compared with 96.8 percent of teachers in traditional public schools. This finding is particularly surprising since Michigan's charter schools are required to staff their schools with certified personnel, just as traditional public schools are.[1] The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires that all classes be taught by "highly qualified teachers" by 2006. Under Michigan law, both charter and traditional public school teachers must be certified to be considered highly qualified. Currently, at least one out of four charter school teachers do not meet this standard.

Table 1. Selectivity of Undergraduate Institution Attended

	Traditional Public Schools	Charter Public Schools
Most Competitive	.2	.9
Highly Competitive	3.3	3.2
Very Competitive	20.3	21.6
Competitive	58.0	46.5
Less Competitive	15.6	19.3
Noncompetitive	2.6	8.7

Selectivity ratings are based on the college selectivity ratings in Barron's 2001 Profiles of American Colleges.

[1] There are a few exceptions to this rule but they are quite limited, affecting only a few charters under very narrow circumstances

Table 2. Percentage of Teachers Certified in Main Teaching Assignment

	Traditional Public Schools			Charter Public Schools		
	Elementary	Secondary	Overall	Elementary	Secondary	Overall
Certified[2]	95.2	95.1	95.1	76.4	63.7	72.5
Not Certified	4.8	4.9	4.9	23.6	36.3	27.5

Teaching Experience:
Quality teaching requires both knowledge about subject matter and practice in communicating that knowledge to students. Experience counts. Teachers with more than three years of experience are more effective than beginning teachers who are just learning their profession.

The NCES data clearly show that charter school teachers have significantly less experience in the classroom than their traditional school colleagues. Indeed, more than half of all charter school teachers are in their first three years of teaching, while only one in seven traditional school teachers has that little teaching experience (see Table 3). This is partly because most of Michigan's charter schools choose not to participate in the state retirement system. As a result, experienced teachers who are vested in the state retirement system may be reluctant to forego that benefit to join charter school staffs .

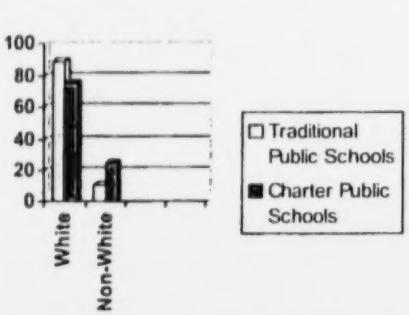
Table 4 looks at the average salary received by teachers at different experience levels. It shows that the average charter school teacher earns less than the average teacher in a traditional school, even when salaries are adjusted to reflect differing experience levels. This salary gap widens from 10 percent to nearly 40 percent as a teacher gains experience.

Diversity in the Teaching Force
Finding teachers who reflect the increasingly diverse demographics of their students is a growing problem for all schools. Charter schools are having greater success than traditional public schools in meeting this challenge. In charters, three of four teachers describe themselves as white, as opposed to eight out of nine teachers in traditional public schools.

Table 3. Percentage of Teachers, by Years of Teaching Experience

	Traditional Public Schools			Charter Public Schools		
	Elem.	Sec.	Overall	Elem.	Sec.	Overall
1 year	3.0	7.2	4.9	22.2	20.3	21.6
2 or 3 years	9.5	7.5	8.6	36.9	28.7	34.3
4 or 5 years	13.6	10.2	12.1	18.9	18.6	18.7
6 to 10 years	18.1	16.4	17.3	9.6	19.5	12.8
11+ years	55.8	58.7	57.1	12.5	13.0	12.6

Salary: Another Indicator of Quality?
Michigan's charter schools are located in the same communities as traditional public schools, sometimes even in former public school buildings. And it is reasonable to suppose that salary affects a school's ability to attract high quality teachers. How do salaries compare between the groups?



[2] Holders of provisional, probational, regular, and advanced certificates are all treated as certified teachers in this analysis. In Michigan, provisional certificates are issued to teachers who have completed all the requirements for certification but have less than three years of teaching experience. The Schools and Staffing Survey used in preparing this brief listed this type of certificate as "probational." The survey defined a "provisional" certificate as one given to persons who are still participating in an "alternative certification program." During the survey period, Michigan did not have any state approved alternative certification programs. Due to the potential confusion over the survey's wording, both categories were treated as indicative of meeting the requirements for a provisional certificate in Michigan. Teachers who report that they hold temporary certificates, no certificates, or that they are teaching on emergency waivers are all considered uncertified.

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Table 4. Average Salary and Years of Teaching Experience

	Traditional Public Schools	Charter Public Schools
1 year	$30,327	$27,590
2 or 3 years	$30,860	$29,715
4 or 5 years	$36,301	$30,858
6 to 10 years	$41,590	$31,026
11+ years	$53,936	$33,247

Discussion

Quality teaching is essential to high student achievement, particularly for students from otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds. While there is little doubt that teaching quality matters, there is disagreement about what teacher characteristics are correlated with high quality teaching. There is evidence that teachers gain expertise with increased experience, particularly in their first few years of teaching. There is also evidence that teachers who are certified and who graduated from more selective universities are more likely to be high quality teachers.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires states to take steps "to ensure that poor and minority children are not taught at higher rates than other children by inexperienced, unqualified or out-of-field teachers." The NCES data show that charter school teachers, on average, are less qualified than their counterparts in traditional public schools. This holds true across several different measures of quality – experience, certification, selectivity of undergraduate institution attended, and possession of advanced degrees. Charter school teachers are also paid less than their traditional public school colleagues, even when their experience levels are taken into consideration.

We do not know why this is so. Highly qualified teacher applicants may be in short supply and charter school operators may have to make do with less qualified candidates. On the other hand, charter schools may be reluctant to pay competitive salaries, which makes it harder for them to hire high quality applicants. In either case, the results are the same. Students in charter schools are generally taught by less qualified teachers than students in traditional public schools.

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